

The Land Grab in Sub-Saharan Africa:
Food security and the guise of sustainability

Research Thesis

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by

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Introduction

With a wave of jubilant liberation, African countries gained political independence in the middle of the twentieth century. Africans believed they would be able to take hold of their own destiny after decades of exploitation and manipulation. The prospect for change and improvement filled the independence movements with euphoric fervor. Yet, as many of these countries achieve fifty years of independence, the conditions on the continent - although improving- remain dismal.

The African continent devastatingly lags behind the majority of the world in education, infant mortality rates, life expectancy, preventable disease rates, and various economic indicators.¹ Even among developing and low-income countries, Africa shows disappointing disparity. Among developing countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, 47.5 percent of the population in 2008 was living below \$1.25 a day, compared to the 22.4 percent average for the total developing world as a whole. Maternal mortality ratio (per 100,000 births) in 2008 was 800 in Sub-Saharan Africa, significantly higher compared to the 230 average for low & middle income countries and 15 for high income countries.²

Moreover, Africa is plagued with the conundrum of political independence, without true economic independence. Tanzania's first President, Julius Nyerere, coined this as flag independence, *uhuru wa bendera*, and warned of the dangers of industrialized nations maintaining economic control over the developing world and thus, minimizing

¹ Global Statistics Data, The World Bank.

² Global Statistics Data, The World Bank

independence to political only.³ Consequently, Africa is more aid dependent than any region in the world. Net Official Development Assistance as percentage of Gross National Income was 4.3 percent on the continent in 2010, compared to .9 percent in the Middle East and North Africa, .7 percent in South Asia, and .7 percent as the average for all low-middle income countries.⁴

Since the 2007-2008 global food crisis, Africa has witnessed an intriguing surge in agricultural investment by outside actors.⁵ Oxfam has estimated that, “in 2009, Africa saw 22 years’ worth of land investment in 12 months.”⁶ Investors are swiftly looking to Africa’s resources as solutions to the looming food and energy crises. Despite the intrigue, the motivations for these investments may not prove beneficial for the African people. One growing form of investment is large-scale land acquisitions by foreign companies for food and fuel production, as well as carbon credits.

This research will argue that these investments, in their current nature, pose a dangerous threat to food security of the affected local communities and are being conducted under the false pretense of sustainability, similar to the function of colonial rhetoric in the 19th century.

³ Mwakikagile, Godfrey. *Nyerere and Africa: End of an Era*. Pretoria: New Africa, 2007, 465.

⁴ Global Statistics Data, The World Bank.

⁵ See Carmody, Pádraig Risteard. *The New Scramble for Africa*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2011 & Deininger, Klaus, Derek Byerlee, Jonathan Lindsay, Andrew Norton, Harris Selod, and Mercedes Stickler. *Rising Global Interest in Farmland: Can It Yield Sustainable and Equitable Benefits*. Publication. Washington, DC: World Bank, 2011.

⁶ Bailey, Robert. *Growing a Better Future Food Justice in a Resource-constrained World*. Publication. Oxford: Oxfam GB, 2011, 18.

This is a conceptual thesis based on a review of the literature in related fields, personal observations while studying in Sub-Saharan Africa, and conversations with experts in the field. After explaining the characteristics and motivations for the land grab in depth, this research will analyze the Herakles Farms' land acquisition in Cameroon as a case study. This research will proceed to address the two objectives identified in the thesis statement, and shall conclude with further research questions, recommendations and a final summary of the findings.

Theoretical Development Context

The spread of privatization as a development policy is central to the land grab. The pressure from the West to privatize natural resources and enterprises in the developing world has paved the way for such investments. At the end of the turbulent 1980s, crystallized by the fall of the Berlin wall, this pro-market discourse gained increased international acceptance. Conceptualized in the Washington Consensus, the utilization of the market as the solution to economic instability was solidified in the West.

After the former Managing Director of the IMF, Michel Camdessus, deemed the 1980s in Africa the "lost decade," the Bretton Woods institutions heavily promoted the privatization of African public enterprises, which contributed to 17% of Africa's total GDP in the early 1980s in terms of factor payments.⁷ While African governments increasingly privatized industries, they subsequently made land and other resources available for foreign investors. Complying with the market-based approach to economic growth was

⁷ Wessel, Robert H. "Privatization in Africa." *African Review of Money Finance and Banking* 2 (1991): 181-82.

compulsory for African governments who sought to be in the Bretton Woods institutions' favor.

Proponents of this system argue that public ownership and market processes are incompatible. Moreover, advocates of privatization argue that public enterprises are generally inefficient and cause stress on government budgets.⁸ While the debate surrounding the validity of neoliberal policies is continual and widespread, it is evident that this policy has paved the way for large-scale land investments in Africa.

What is the Land Grab and to What Extent is it Occurring?

Undoubtedly, there is a steep rise in agricultural investment in Sub-Saharan Africa. Foreign companies from East to West are leasing or purchasing land from national governments in the developing world with the intention of producing crops for export. A result of the 2007-08 food crisis (to be discussed below), the pace of land grabs around the world has accelerated rapidly. The World Bank reported that,

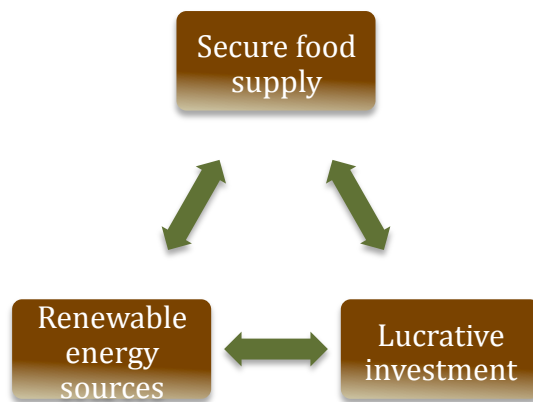
Compared to an average annual expansion of global agricultural land of less than 4 million hectares before 2008, approximately 56 million hectares worth of large-scale farmland deals were announced even before the end of 2009. More than 70 percent of such demand has been in Africa; countries such as Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Sudan have transferred millions of hectares to investors in recent years.⁹

⁸ Wessel, 181-95.

⁹ Deininger, Klaus, Derek Byerlee, Jonathan Lindsay, Andrew Norton, Harris Selod, and Mercedes Stickler. *Rising Global Interest in Farmland: Can It Yield Sustainable and Equitable Benefits*. Publication. Washington, DC: World Bank, 2011, xiv.

An Oxfam publication reports that 80 million hectares, part of approximately 1,200 land deals, are being negotiated or have been completed worldwide and 60 percent of these are located in Sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁰ The motivations of these investors can be divided into three broad categories, as indicated by Figure 1.

Figure 1: Motivations for Land Grab



The first motivation is to secure a food supply. This group consists of many Gulf states, due to their unfavorable agriculture conditions and available capital, but also includes Western investors. The reason for this recent surge will be discussed below in the context of the global food crisis. Production of biofuels is another major motivation for large-scale land acquisitions. British companies have been dominating in land acquisition for biofuel production, as 11 companies have leased approximately 1.6 million acres.¹¹ Thirdly, private firms, including Goldman Sachs, Deutuch Bank and BlackRock of New York City are

¹⁰ Bailey, 18.

¹¹ Carrington, Damien. "UK firm's failed biofuel dream wrecks lives of Tanzania villagers." The Guardian. 29 October 2011.

investing in land. According to GRAIN, BlackRock created a 200 million dollar hedge fund for agricultural investments.¹² These companies aim to make major profits through these investments, as land is relatively cheap in many parts of the developing world and is projected to increase over time.

Centrality of the 2007-2008 Food Crisis: Motivations for the Land Grab

To understand the current interest in African land, it is essential to contextualize it in the wake of the 2007-08 global food crisis. Eric Holt-Giménez and Raj Patel with Annie Shattuck explain in depth the causes and results of the 2007-08 global food crisis in Food Rebellions!: Crisis and the Hunger for Justice. Beginning in 2006, the world witnessed “The overnight reversal of the 30-year global trend in cheap food.”¹³ For example, according to the BBC, the average global price for wheat, maize, soy and rice rose by 130%, 31%, 87% and 74%, respectively.¹⁴ This resulted in food import bills of least developed countries (LDCs) to increase by 30% in 2006 and 37% in 2008.¹⁵

This drastic rise in commodity prices has pushed more of the developing world into poverty. Josette Sheeran, executive director of the World Food Program, asserts, “ ‘We’re seeing more people hungry and at a greater number than before. There is food on the shelves but people are priced out of the market.’ ”¹⁶ The global concern that commodity prices will continue to rise to unprecedented levels is shared by all nations and has

¹² Holt-Giménez, Eric, Raj Patel, and Annie Shattuck. *Food Rebellions!: Crisis and the Hunger for Justice*. Cape Town: Pambazuka, 2009. Print, 97.

¹³ Giménez, Patel, Shattuck, 10.

¹⁴ cited in Giménez, Patel, Shattuck, 6.

¹⁵ Bello, Walden. Foreword. *Food Rebellions!: Crisis and the Hunger for Justice*. By Eric Holt-Giménez, Raj Patel, and Annie Shattuck. Cape Town: Pambazuka, 2009. N. pag. Print.

¹⁶ qtd in Giménez, Patel, Shattuck, 7.

“created fears that dependence on world markets to satisfy domestic demand has become risky.”¹⁷ This has fuelled the recent surge of land acquisition in Africa and throughout the world. Countries want to secure an adequate food supply without being forced to utilize the global market to do so. A World Bank publication explains:

The 2007–08 boom in food prices and the subsequent period of relatively high and volatile prices reminded many import-dependent countries of their vulnerability to food insecurity and prompted them to seek opportunities to secure food supplies overseas. Together with the reduced attractiveness of other assets due to the financial crisis, the boom led to a “rediscovery” of the agricultural sector by different types of investors and a wave of interest in land acquisitions in developing countries.¹⁸

In addition to nations wanting to acquire food supplies at desirable prices, developed countries and private investors are anxious to secure sources of renewable fuel. The amount of agricultural land that is being used for fuel production is growing, having doubled from 2004 to 2008 (now at 36 million hectares).¹⁹ The shift in production has contributed significantly the rise in global food prices, while US and European Union policies have created a wide market for these products.²⁰

The figure below (created for an Oxfam publication) shows the relationship between the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations’ food price index and the number

¹⁷ *From Land Grab to Win-Win Seizing the Opportunities of International Investments in Agriculture*. Rep. June ed. Vol. 4. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2009, 1.

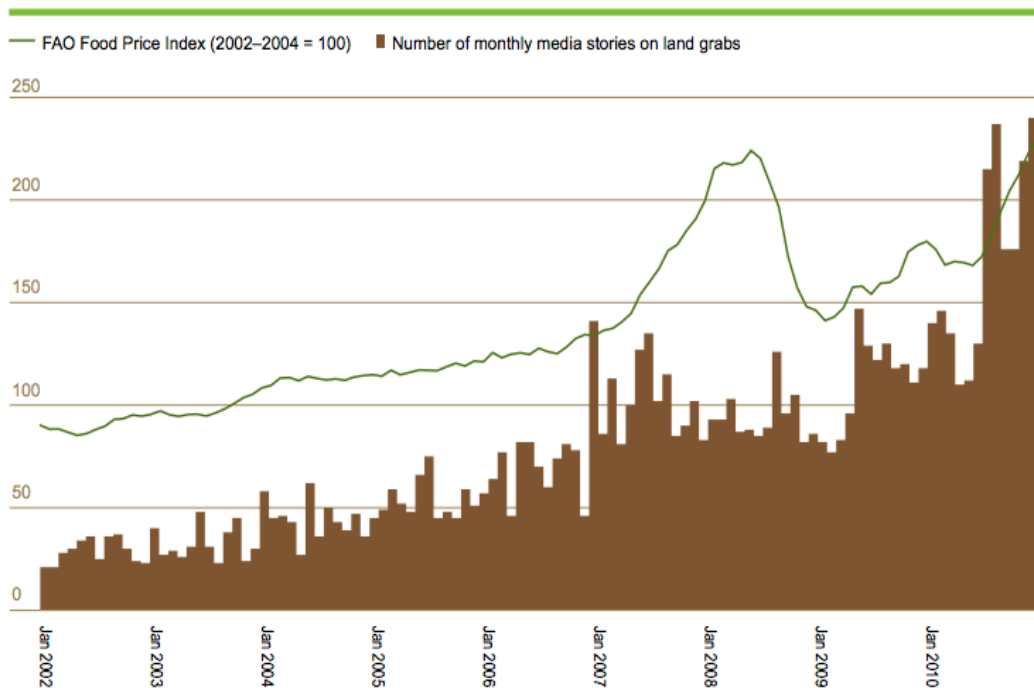
¹⁸ Deininger et al., xxv.

¹⁹ Deininger et al., 13.

²⁰ Giménez, Patel, Shattuck, 15.

of land grabs reported. It is clear that the number of land grabs increased after the peak of the global food crisis in 2008, the reasons for which were explained above.

Figure 2: FAO Food Price Index and Reported Land Grabs



Source: Bailey, 18; FAO <http://www.fao.org/worldfoodsituation/wfs-home/foodpricesindex/en/>

The demand for land in the developing world, whether for food or fuel, has threatening consequences for the affected rural communities. The next section will advance this argument in the context of a land deal in Cameroon.

The Case Study

SG Sustainable Oils Cameroon, Ltd (SGSOC) a US based company, began its involvement in Cameroon in 2009. This case is particularly interesting because the debate between the company and the opposing groups (notably the Oakland Institute and Greenpeace International) has played out in a relatively accessible manner, from open letters to published reports.²¹

SGSOC acquired 73,086 hectares of land (180,599 acres) in the Ndian and Kupe-Manenguba divisions of Cameroon from a convention with the government in 2009. The company's attempt to present itself as a pro-environment, sustainable partner is made evident by its name: Sustainable Oils Cameroon, Ltd. This American company is owned by Herakles Farms, lead by CEO and chairman Bruce Wrobel. The company plans to produce palm oil on the land and holds exclusive farming rights through a 99-year land lease.²² Ignoring two local court rulings calling on the company to halt work, in addition to the absence of the necessary Presidential Decree, the company cleared land for the establishment of tree nurseries and a 3km road in 2009.²³ The company commissioned Environmental and Social Impacts Assessment (ESIA) suggests that the project could affect the livelihoods of the 14,000 people living in the area, but numbers as high as 45,000 have

²¹ see Wrobel, Bruce. "Open Letter of Bruce Wrobel, CEO of Herakles Farms in Response to the Report Issued September 2012 by the Oakland Institute Titled "Understanding Land Investment Deals in Africa" with the Sub - Heading "...The Deceit of Herakles Farms in Cameroon"." Letter to Reader. N.d. MS. N.p., and Wrobel, Bruce. "Re: Herakles Farms NPP Application- Submitted 15- February 2012." Letter to Mr. Darrel Webber, Secretary General, RSPO. 24 Aug. 2012. MS. N.p. and Mousseau, Frederic. *Understanding Land Investment Deals in Africa, Massive Deforestation Portrayed as Sustainable Development: The Herakles Farms In Cameroon*. Publication. Oakland: Oakland Institute in Collaboration with Greenpeace International, 2012. Print.

²² The convention has been made available online at:
<http://cameroonveritas.files.wordpress.com/2011/08/sgsoc-convention1.pdf>

²³ Mousseau, Frederic. *Understanding Land Investment Deals in Africa, Massive Deforestation Portrayed as Sustainable Development: The Herakles Farms In Cameroon*. Publication. Oakland: Oakland Institute in Collaboration with Greenpeace International, 2012. Print.

been suggested by NGOs.²⁴ The majority of this population relies on the land to sustain their livelihoods.

Cameroon is currently the 13th largest producer of palm oil in the world, producing 230,000 metric tons. A deputy mayor from a village within the SGSOC land acquisition has voiced his opposition to the production of more palms, in favor of saving the land for local farming, hunting and fishing. In an interview with Reuters, he explains, " 'We don't lack palm oil. Shall we not also have space for our family? We have children to feed . . . We are tired of palms, palms, palms.' "²⁵

The company promotes itself as an environmentally friendly and pro-community partner. Its literature discusses the positive impacts for the local residents, citing economic opportunities and future social development projects. Moreover, the company points to its partnership with All for Africa, a non-governmental organization (NGO), that focuses on community development and environmental conservation. The organization states its mission as:

All for Africa takes a collaborative approach to poverty reduction by working with the private sector to foster projects that generate economic and social benefits in the communities in which they are located. Programs focus on agriculture, clean water, community health, education, energy, environmental impact, micro-financing and skills training/livelihood creation. In addition, All for Africa promotes

²⁴ *Environmental and Social Impact Assessment for SG Sustainable Oils Cameroon Limited*. Rep. Bethesda, MD: H & B Consulting, 2011. ; Mousseau

²⁵ John, Mark. "Special Report: Africa palm-oil plan pits activists vs N.Y. investors." Reuters. 18 July 2012.

collaborative conversation and education amongst all stakeholders including private sector, NGOs and civic organizations.²⁶

The mission statement hits on all the points of the typical pro-community/environment rhetoric. The partnership with this NGO helps reinforces the idea that SGSOC is built on the same principles. However, it is interesting to note that the company's Executive Director and Chairman is also Bruce Wrobel from Herakles Farms and the NGO is owned by this same parent company. As the Oakland Institute points out, All for Africa's promise to plant one million trees means only palm-oil trees, not increasing forests. They argue, "This is happening with a backdrop of silence regarding the fact that massive deforestation of tropical rainforest will be required so that palm oil trees can be planted."²⁷ This partnership is exploited to shed a positive light on the destruction of livelihoods of the local population.

In *The Herakles Debacle*, the filmmaker Frank Bieleu (raised in Cameroon), investigates the company's land acquisition and the community's reaction. The video reveals not only the community's stark opposition to their land being taken, but the manipulative nature of the company. It includes interviews with farmers who claim their land was taken while they were away without written contracts or notices. It shows the water well that was donated by All for Africa and Herakles Farms as part of the socioeconomic development promise,

²⁶ <http://www.allforafrica.org/>

²⁷ Mousseau, 9.

but reveals that it hasn't functioned since the day it was installed 13 months prior.²⁸

Although this video may possess some bias of its own, it does show some glimpse of the community's reaction to the land deal. This video, in combination with a report from the Oakland Institute and GreenPeace International, draws attention to the illegality of the Herakles deal and the costly effects it will have on the local residents. These organizations collected dozens of testimonials from locals voicing strong opposition to the project in two research trips in Summer 2012.²⁹ The resulting report notes loopholes in the original contract that can be exploited to take advantage of the Cameroonians. For instance, it reveals a lack of guarantees on compensation for displacement, wage discrepancies, deforestation, and loss of biodiversity.³⁰

Herakles Farms' Wrobel responded to the claims with a fiery open letter to investors and the general public. Without providing any testimonials, Wrobel is quick to discount the claim that communities are resistant to the project by encouraging readers to contact the people in the village directly to get the "real" story. He writes, "... one can easily check by contacting the chiefs of each village for their opinion of the project. Support is generally widespread. It will always be difficult to satisfy everyone, so you will find a small portion of the population still unsure of the project (although our goal is to ultimately win 100% support)." ³¹ Using this as a counter claim to the scanned documents included in the Oakland Institute Report with communities' expressing their hostility to the project, in

²⁸ *The Herakles Debacle*. Dir. Franck Bieleu. Revaf Pictures, Oakland Institute, The Center for Environment and Development, 2012.

²⁹ Mousseau, 3.

³⁰ Mousseau, 12.

³¹ "Open Letter of Bruce Wrobel, CEO of Herakles Farms in Response to the Report Issued September 2012 by the Oakland Institute titled "Understanding Land Investment Deals in Africa" with the sub - heading "...The Deceit of Herakles Farms in Cameroon", 5

addition to the video testimony is a weak gesture at best. Moreover, the likelihood that an average reader would write the company to obtain the phone numbers and make the individual calls is highly unlikely.

Similarly concerning is the way Herakles conducted the surveys aimed to judge the communities approval. It was reported that the surveys were undertaken alongside armed guards.³² The company later conceded that this, “ ‘may have influenced some of the participants in their responses.’ ”³³ Additionally, the local meetings held by Herakles to collect community responses to the over 300 page environmental assessment were mostly inaccessible due to washed out roads in the middle of the rainy season.³⁴ All of this information was left out in the open letter.

More troubling is the withdrawal of Herakles Farms’ application to the Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), the watchdog body that aims to ensure the sustainability of palm oil and protect the communities affected by its production. Before the RSPO could complete the review of grievances submitted by various organizations (WWF, GreenPeace, etc), Herakles Farms withdrew their application for membership. In the withdrawal letter published on the company website they explain,

We submitted this application 6.5 months ago, and it is still pending.

Through its development, Herakles Farms is addressing dire humanitarian need in the Republic of Cameroon. However, the NPP grievance process is preventing the

³² John, np.

³³ as quoted in John, np.

³⁴ John, np.

company from moving forward during a critical and time-sensitive period, in which we must move our first planting of seedlings from the nursery to the field.³⁵

The irony in this rebuttal is apparent. RSPO was created to promote transparency and adherence to local and national laws in the interest of local populations and ensure sustainable economic development and environmental preservation.³⁶ As one journalist reported, “Without the nod of the RSPO, Herakles would struggle to support its argument that it will be a model for producing palm oil in an environment-friendly way.”³⁷

The Herakles Farms’ deal in Cameroon is a prime example of the current trend of exploitation occurring in Sub-Saharan Africa. By promoting the image of a philanthropic and environmentally friendly company, Herakles Farms attempted to complete the project without great scrutiny from the international community. Food security of local communities is at great risk. Subsistence farmers have become landless, wage-earners and are not guaranteed compensation. The company promises the creation of 7,500 jobs, without any indication of a timetable, or guarantee of doing so.³⁸ The company has managed to supersede Cameroonian laws and will be able to pay employees less than the national minimum wage because of the convention signed with the government.³⁹ The project will result in deforestation, loss of biodiversity and overall loss of land for locals.

³⁵ “Re: Herakles Farms NPP Application- submitted 15- February, 2012”.

³⁶ <http://www.rspo.org/>

³⁷ John, np.

³⁸ Mousseau, 4.

³⁹ Mousseau, 4.

Thousands of Cameroonians' livelihoods remain at risk if this project is to be implemented as planned.

The remainder of this research will consider the broader implications of this new wave of investment, drawing on other reports and case studies.

Food Security and the Land Grab

Food security is undoubtedly at risk in the local communities affected by land grabs. The resulting displacement and restructuring of local populations without fair compensation, coupled with the increase in land being used for fuel instead of food endangers already vulnerable populations.

Displacement and Restructuring without Fair Compensation

Agriculture is essential to the livelihoods of approximately 65 percent of Africans.⁴⁰ 80 percent of total farms in Sub-Saharan Africa are considered small farms, totaling an estimated 33 million.⁴¹ A substantial and growing body of literature suggests that supporting these small farmers can be the key to alleviating poverty and achieving sustainable food security.⁴² Even the World Bank has made an ideological adjustment in some publications to prioritize small farmers in agricultural development programs.⁴³ The

⁴⁰ *Ending Hunger in Africa: Prospects for the Small Farmer*. Rep. Washington: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2004. Print.

⁴¹ cited in Giménez, Patel, Shattuck, 112.

⁴² see: Giménez, Patel, Shattuck, *Ending Hunger in Africa: Prospects for the Small Farmer*. Rep. Washington: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2004. Print.,

⁴³ *Land & Food Security*. Publication. The World Bank, 2 Oct. 2012. Web.
<<http://go.worldbank.org/S0D96SZZT0>>.

potential to increase food security by supporting these farmers is clear, as Human Rights Advocates suggests,

Subsistence-based agriculture is directly linked to food security among the rural poor in developing nations. Therefore enhancing the availability of agricultural resources and services to these rural communities may be the most effective means to eradicate poverty within in the developing world.⁴⁴

The advance of large-scale land acquisitions in the developing world counters this theory. It creates more large, plantation farms and claims to improve food security by providing new economic opportunities to affected communities. There are many faults with this strategy.

Firstly, compensation for “involuntary resettlement”, mandated under the Ecuador Principles (a environmental and social risk framework established by the International Finance Corporation), is not guaranteed or quantified in many of these conventions that grant land rights to foreign investors.⁴⁵ As noted with the SGSOC case, the company does not guarantee job creation or payment at national minimum wage. Further, there is no mechanism to punish these companies if they fall through on their promises and meanwhile they maintain exclusive farming rights to land that was previously used by subsistence farmers.

⁴⁴ Anning, Marna P. *Anchoring Food Security Amongst Rural Women Subsistence Farmers: Ghana as a Model, Supplemental Report to Human Rights Advocates' Written Statement for the 56th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women*. Rep. Berkeley: Human Rights Advocates, n.d. Print.

⁴⁵ Mousseau, 4.

An issue that can exacerbate the compensation discrepancy is the lack of clear land tenure laws. In many countries, Cameroon included, colonial land tenure laws exist simultaneously and in direct conflict with traditional laws and informal ownership⁴⁶. Foreign investors often claim that land is not being used, but a World Bank publication counters, "In so many cases land is already being used or claimed – yet existing land uses and claims go unrecognised because land users are marginalised from formal land rights and access to the law and institutions."⁴⁷

Secondly, even if job creation does occur, it will restructure communities from subsistence farmers to wage-earners. A GRAIN report explains,

The governments, the investors and the development agencies that are being drawn into these projects will argue that jobs will be created and some food will be left behind. But these don't replace land and the possibility of working and living off the land [. . .] Farmers will never be real farmers again, job or no job. This will probably be the biggest consequence.⁴⁸

Landless, contract farmers are more vulnerable to fluctuations and shocks in the market for staple crops. Ironically, this is the same motivation that drives the land grab in the first place. Already impoverished communities will become more likely to be "priced-out" of the market, a major threat to their food security.

⁴⁶ Puépi, Bernard. "Land Ownership Conflicts in Cameroon." *GIM International* 24.12 (2010): Np. 10 Dec. 2010. Web. 15 Apr. 2013. <http://www.gim-international.com/issues/articles/id1628-Land_Ownership_Conflicts_in_Cameroon.html>.

⁴⁷ Cotula, L., Vermeulen, S., Leonard, R. and Keeley, J., 2009, Land Grab of Development Opportunity? Agricultural Investment and International Land Deals in Africa, IIED/FAO/IFAD, London/Rome , 100.

⁴⁸ *Seized: The 2008 Land Grab for Food and Financial Security*. Briefing. Barcelona: Grain, 2008, np.

Further, it is a fallacy that job-creation can realistically maintain the level of employment provided by family farming. A sampling of mono-crop plantations reveals that potential employment is much lower compared to family farming with multiple crops.

Table 1:

Comparison of employment opportunities: *Family farming v. Mono-crop plantations*

Crop	Jobs per 100 hectares
Varied: Family Farming	35
Palm oil/sugar	10
Eucalyptus	2
Soybeans	.5

Source: Giménez, Patel, Shattuck, 72.

We see that the potential of a family farm is 35 jobs per hectare, creating considerably more employment than a mono-crop plantation like soybeans, which creates just .5 of a job.

Another case study sheds light on the imminent dangers to local communities and food security. Sun Biofuels, a British company acquired land in the Kisaware region of Tanzania in 2008. They promised to compensate the villages that abruptly lost their livelihoods with 700 jobs, schools, wells and a plethora of social services.⁴⁹ However, the company went under and with it, went all these promises, including the employment of hundreds of locals.

⁴⁹ Carrington, Damien. "UK firm's failed biofuel dream wrecks lives of Tanzania villagers." The Guardian. 29 October 2011.

The land has still not been returned, and the surrounding communities continue to suffer.

As one resident plainly described, “ ‘People feel this is like the return of colonialism.’ ”⁵⁰

Without land, these communities are left without resources to feed themselves, and the financial resources to purchase food.

The Sun Biofuels’ outcome is not unique. The Guardian reports 30 failed biofuel projects in 15 countries on the continent.⁵¹ In another case in Tanzania, AgriSol Energy’s agreement with the government includes the evacuation of two refugee settlements in Katumba and Mishamo. The Oakland Institute explains,

Yet, the 162,000 refugees living there fled Burundi in 1972 and have been farming this land for 40 years. In June 2009, Amnesty International reported refugees being pressured to leave camps. Some of them lost their homes to a fire set by individuals acting under the instructions of the Tanzanian authorities, to get them to vacate the camp. Refugee leaders who have attempted to organize affected refugees have been arrested and detained.⁵²

In conclusion, displacement and loss of land has detrimental effects on food security. The restructuring of communities from subsistence farmers to wage-earners makes them more vulnerable to fluctuations in food prices and overlooks the potential to achieve food security through supporting small farmers. Compensation in the form of job creation

⁵⁰ Carrington, np.

⁵¹ Carrington, np.

⁵² “*Understanding Land Investment Deals in Africa: FAQs on Food Security & Western Investors*”. Rep. The Oakland Institute, n.d. Web. 8 June 2008.
<http://www.oaklandinstitute.org/sites/oaklandinstitute.org/files/OI_FAQsjune5.pdf>.

cannot guarantee a sustainable livelihood and moreover, there is often no mechanism in the conventions with foreign investors to punish companies that do not follow through on economic compensation promises.

Equally concerning for local populations is the effect the land grabs have on water scarcity. One in three Africans is already experiencing water shortages and as water is diverted to production on foreign land investments, populations are increasingly more at risk.⁵³

Food security and Agrofuels

The increase in land acquisitions is also characterized by a shift from producing cash crops to agrofuels/biofuels by foreign investors (biofuel and agrofuel will be used interchangeably for the remainder of their research).⁵⁴ In a study involving 389 large-scale land acquisitions in 80 countries, the World Bank found that 35 percent were destined for agrofuel production.⁵⁵

An increasing body of literature suggests that agrofuels will catastrophically increase hunger and poverty.⁵⁶ The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier De

⁵³ *Squeezing Africa Dry: Behind Every Land Grab Is a Water Grab*. Rep. Barcelona: GRAIN, 2012, np.

⁵⁴ *From Land Grab to Win-Win Seizing the Opportunities of International Investments in Agriculture*. Rep. June ed. Vol. 4. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2009. Print. Economic and Social Perspectives.

⁵⁵ *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food A/65/281*, Item 69 (b) of the Provisional Agenda: United Nations General Assembly, Sixty-fifth Session, August 2010, 5.

⁵⁶ see: Holt-Giménez, Eric, Raj Patel, and Annie Shattuck. "Agrofuels: A Bad Idea at the Worst Possible Time." *Food Rebellions!: Crisis and the Hunger for Justice*. Cape Town: Pambazuka, 2009. 68-80 ; Bassey, Nnimmo. "The Wheels of Progress." *To Cook a Continent: Destructive Extraction and Climate Crisis in Africa*.

Schutter, called their production a “crime against humanity.”⁵⁷ Indeed the promotion of agrofuels has contributed to the rise in food prices and poses multiple threats to rural communities in the developing world. On one hand, the rise in global demand for ethanol and other agrofuels translates into higher food prices globally as more “food” is used as fuel. In 2011, The Guardian reported that, “About 40% of US corn goes into biofuels. Today, 18% of biofuels now used in the UK are made from wheat and corn that are staple foods in the developing world.”⁵⁸

Secondly, the rise in demand leads to the grabbing of land in rural communities to meet production needs. Small farmers are pushed off of their land, and subsequently become more food insecure. Lester Brown of the Earth Policy Institute explained that, “The grain it takes to fill a 25-gallon tank with ethanol just once will feed one person for a whole year.”⁵⁹

A third concern is that as the demand for ethanol increases, the price of corn rises and subsequently more is planted. This results in less land available for other food staple crops like soy and wheat, and thus the prices of these crops rise accordingly.⁶⁰ This demand does not seem likely to abate in the future. Developed nations continue to set targets for renewable energies that expand the market. A World Bank publication explains, “Internationally, government consumption targets have been the key driver of the biofuels boom, as they create guaranteed markets for decades to come. Government policies have

Oxford: Pambazuka, 2012. 46-59; *The 2008 Land Grab for Food and Financial Security*. Issue brief. Barcelona: Grain, 2008.; Carmody, Pádraig Risteard. *The New Scramble for Africa*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2011. Print.

⁵⁷ Giménez, Patel, Shattuck, 68.

⁵⁸ Rice, Tim. "Biofuels Are Driving Food Prices Higher." *The Guardian*. N.p., 1 June 2011. Web. 14 Mar. 2013.

⁵⁹ Giménez, Patel, Shattuck, 68.

⁶⁰ Giménez, Patel, Shattuck, 70.

also provided financial incentives to the private sector (for example, subsidies and tax breaks)."⁶¹ Governments continue to support biofuel production without reservations in regards to threats to the affected populations. However, the European Union has recently imposed some restrictions on their targets, limiting production for food-based fuels to 5%. Connie Hedegaard, European Commissioner for Climate Action, explains, " 'We cannot morally afford to build a very big industry on something that is not good for the environment or for food prices.' "⁶²

Clearly, biofuel production in the developing world will have costly effects on local populations. Global food prices will increase as more land is dedicated to fuel production. Populations that are forced off their land as a result of land acquisitions for the production of agrofuels will lose their livelihoods as subsistence farmers are be at a greater risk for food insecurity.

Finally, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food has intrinsically linked the fundamental human right to food to the right to land. He explains,

Access to land and security of tenure are also essential for the ability of smallholders to achieve a decent standard of living. As noted above, the right to food imposes on States an obligation not to deprive individuals of access to the productive resources on which they depend. Where a community has settled on a piece of land and depends on that land for its livelihood, the obligation to respect the right to food

⁶¹ Cotula, L et al., 54.

⁶² qtd. in Carrington, Damian. "Biodiesel Industry Dealt a Blow by EU Policy Changes." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 21 Sept. 2012. Web. 25 Mar. 2013.
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2012/sep/21/biodiesel-industry-eu-policy-changes>>.

thus requires that eviction of the community from that land be prohibited unless certain conditions are fulfilled.⁶³

Thus, it can be argued that in some cases, these land acquisitions are violating international human rights. As land is directly linked to the right to food, the governments selling this land are denying the human right to food to their populations.

While the effects of the land grab on food security have been widely discussed and documented, little analysis has been done about how these companies present themselves and justify their actions to the general public and to their investors. There is a legitimate comparison to be made here between the colonial rhetoric and the current language of these foreign investors, both utilizing a positive cover story to justify exploitation.

The Guise of Sustainability

The majority of Africa was formally colonized by European powers with the Berlin Conference in 1885. It created the borders that exist today with few exceptions, irrespective of language, culture or the wishes of the people.

Although colonization represents a relatively short period in African history, its effects are long lasting, widespread, debilitating, and threatened the cultural foundation of the continent. The impact of colonialism on the continent is well studied, and scholars continue to analyze the lasting effects on political, economic and social institutions. However, when the European powers gathered at the Berlin Conference, the rhetoric was quite different.

⁶³ *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food A/65/281*, 9.

They aimed, although perhaps half-heartedly, to establish a mutually beneficial relationship between Europe and Africa. The most notable explorers in Africa used this same type of language, noting the potential to “save” the continent. For the purpose of this research, this will be considered the “colonial rhetoric,” defined as the language and attitude of the Europeans that portrayed the exploitation of the African continent in a positive, mutually beneficial light.

The land grab represents an appropriation of this colonial strategy. By couching the land grab in terms of sustainability and global benefit, companies attract investors and gain support from the public, national governments and international institutions. In this sense, the “going green” movement is being hijacked by investors looking to make a profit under the false pretense of sustainability.

Rhetoric of the Colonizers

Prior to the formal colonization of Africa, the idea of Africa as the “dark continent” was widespread in Europe. David Livingstone appealed to Europe to “save” Africa and Africans with a combination of Christianity, commerce and civilization.⁶⁴ The image of Africa for Europeans was exclusively crafted by a relatively small number of testimonials. Bates explains one variation of opinions:

From the 17th century onwards, debates over the slave trade, racism, and colonialism helped crystallise these negative narratives in Western discourses.

Abolitionists argued that Africa was a place of suffering because the slave trade

⁶⁴ Bassey, Nnimmo. *To Cook a Continent: Destructive Extraction and Climate Crisis in Africa*. Oxford: Pambazuka, 2012, 5.

provoked war, disease, famine and poverty; anti-Abolitionists said Africa was so forbidding as to make slavery in foreign countries a positive escape. Either way, Africa was full of 'savagery' and constant war.⁶⁵

This conception of Africa as a savage and war ravaged land promoted its colonization. The representatives at the Berlin Conference justified their actions by presenting them as a kind of paternalistic service to the continent. As Article VI of Chapter 1 of the Charter, explains:

All the Powers exercising sovereign rights or influence in the aforesaid territories bind themselves to watch over the preservation of the native tribes, and to care for the improvement of the conditions of their moral and material well-being, and to help in suppressing slavery, and especially the slave trade. They shall, without distinction of creed or nation, protect and favour all religious, scientific or charitable institutions and undertakings created and organized for the above ends, or which aim at instructing the natives and bringing home to them the blessings of civilization.⁶⁶

The paternalistic nature of early colonialism is evident; by artificially taking the role of the protector, it inhibited the ability to view oneself as the oppressor. Despite a few capricious remarks about protecting the "natives", the fact that the land was already inhabited with

⁶⁵ Bates, Robert. "Africa Through Western Eyes: The World's Dark Continent or Capitalism's Shining Light?" *Think Africa Press*. N.p., 31 Oct. 2012. Web. 10 Mar. 2013.

⁶⁶ The Berlin Conference: The General Act of Feb. 26, 1885, original document available for viewing at <http://archive.org/stream/conventionrevisi00greaiala#page/n0/mode/2up>

intact governing mechanisms and social structures, was utterly ignored. European powers saw themselves as the answer. Bates elaborates:

Colonialism went even further; because of what they thought they knew about Africa – a land of fantastical beasts and cannibals, slaves, ‘backward races’ and so on – the colonial powers managed to convince themselves that they were subjugating Africans (and others) for their own good. European violence was going to stop the wars endemic to Africa, and their enlightened (over-)rule would be to the benefit of all.⁶⁷

Rhetoric of Foreign Investors

There is a striking similarity between the European attitude/ rhetoric and the way in which companies that are engaging in large scale land acquisitions portray themselves today.

Table 3 shows a small sampling of companies that have recently acquired land in Sub-Saharan Africa and their self-portrayal to the general public.

Table 2: Land Grabbing Companies and Sustainability

Company	Country	Excerpt from website
Ferrostal AG, Germany	Zambia	“That is why we want to give something back to this society, which in turn will have a positive effect: sustainable entrepreneurship. We see sustainability as economically, environmentally and socially valuable action with a long-term focus. We are active in a number of fields in this respect.” ⁶⁸
Sun Biofuels, UK	Tanzania, Mozambique	“Our strategy is to cover all areas of the biofuels value chain from cultivation and harvest to oil extraction and marketing. Sun Biofuels is committed to sustainable development within

⁶⁷ Bates, np.

⁶⁸ <http://www.ferrostaal.com/en/company/sustainability/>

		the countries that we operate. We strive to create minimal impact on the environment while bringing employment and welfare to what are often disadvantaged communities.” ⁶⁹
Agrisol Energy, USA	Tanzania	“AgriSol Energy’s strategy is to partner with national, regional and local governments, business leaders and communities to develop modern, sustainable and profitable agricultural enterprises that result in increased food, energy and economic security.” ⁷⁰
Sime Darby, Malaysia	Liberia	“Sime Darby Plantation and all its subsidiaries and associates believe in responsible and sustainable agriculture. Sime Darby Plantation is the world’s largest producer of certified sustainable palm oil, a world leader in sustainable agriculture and continues to enhance its already leading efforts at improving agricultural practices.” ⁷¹
Herakles Farms, USA	Cameroon	“Herakles Farms aims to meet growing global demand for food by developing sustainable and environmentally benign projects with full support of the local people. Through its work, the company expects to provide significant benefits relating to poverty reduction, food security, illness prevention and education among other positive impacts.” ⁷²

There are obvious common themes between these investors: sustainability, community development, food security, etc. Yet there is a great danger in accepting these promises given the potential devastating effects of displacement and loss of livelihoods from these companies’ activities. Although all of the promises made by these companies are potentially beneficial in Africa, the reality of the land grab remains; local populations are losing their land and have to rely on foreign companies for compensation and employment. Regardless of the rhetoric, there is no guarantee that the companies will follow through on their

⁶⁹ <http://sunbiofuels.leo.titaninternet.co.uk/company.html>

⁷⁰ <http://agrisolenergy.com/>

⁷¹ http://www.simedarby.com/Sime_Darby_Response_to_FOE_Allegations.aspx

⁷² <http://heraklesfarms.com/sustainability.html>

sustainability and food security objectives. That is to be expected, as these are not development organizations, but are profit seeking businesses.

The ability of these companies to couch the land grab in the terms of global benefit makes them more palatable to the general public and investors. They are strategically positioning themselves as part of the global “going green” movement. According to the International Monetary Fund, this movement is growing significantly, as the number of countries with renewable energy agendas (climate change, carbon emissions and energy security) more than doubled from 2005- 2010.⁷³

Moreover, even in the unlikely scenario that these companies do follow through on their food security and sustainability agendas, this will not offset the effects of the initial land purchase. GRAIN argues, “It should be abundantly clear, however, that behind the rhetoric of win-win deals the real aim of these contracts is not agricultural development, much less rural development, but simply agribusiness development. Perhaps only when that is understood do the contradictions underlying this land grab momentum make sense.”⁷⁴

Further Comparisons

Additional comparisons can be drawn between colonial strategies and the current nature of investment in Africa. These investments are embedding the colonial nature of export economies deeper into African infrastructure. Specifically, this is occurring by refocusing

⁷³ Eyraud, Luc, and Benedict Clements. "Going Green." *FINANCE & DEVELOPMENT*, 49.2 (2012): np. IMF, June 2012. Web.

⁷⁴ *Seized: The 2008 Land Grab for Food and Financial Security*, np.

production on resource- based exports and extraction.⁷⁵ A further comparison can be made between the colonial power strategy of indirect rule and the methods of foreign investors in the land grab. The strategies of the colonization of Africa varied by country, however, the majority were ruled by indirect rule, characteristic of the British, but also used by the French, Portugese and Belgians.⁷⁶ Thus, indirect rule will be the assumed method of colonial ruling strategy for this comparison. This strategy can be summarized with the following:

Under indirect rule, the colonial ruler divides the indigenous people into a privileged ruling group and an unprivileged ruled group. The ruling group appropriated the resources of the ruled group both for themselves and for the colonial ruler. Therefore, the ruled group cannot observe how the resources extracted from them are divided between the colonial ruler and the ruling group.⁷⁷

There is a strong parallel to be drawn here with the methods of foreign investors. Typically, the land deal is signed with the national government and elites, the privileged ruling group, and they reap the financial benefits of the purchase. The unprivileged ruled group, the local population, does not see any of these benefits, nor are they guaranteed any compensation or insight into the potential or realized profits of the foreign company.

Conclusions

⁷⁵ Carmody, 8.

⁷⁶ qtd in Nobuhiro and Okazawa. 407.

⁷⁷ Mizuno, Nobuhiro, and Ryosuke Okazawa. "Colonial Experience and Postcolonial Underdevelopment in Africa." *Public Choice* 141.3-4 (2009): 417.

Overlooking the consequences of these land deals in exchange for the development and sustainability promises offered by the foreign companies jeopardizes the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands in favor of global agribusiness.

The market for land acquisitions was expanded due to the neoliberal policies established by the Washington Consensus and imposed on African nations who desperately needed IMF and World Bank support. With privatization, came the opportunity for wealthy nations to control the resources of the developing world. The land grab encapsulates this systematic failure for the developing world, as the consequences on the world's poor are clear. Africa cannot afford to hope for the best and wait and see how the effects of this current wave of exploitation will transpire.

The displacement of rural subsistence farmers forces them to become wage-earners and they are subsequently more vulnerable to fluctuations in the global price of food staples. Compensation for land is not guaranteed due to the lack of clear land tenure laws. The transition of more land from food to fuel production has catastrophic consequences for already food insecure populations and these effects will only become worse as more land is dedicated to fuel. Although foreign governments and investors and international institutions are responsible for this surge in land deals, African governments should not free of blame for taking these deals and willingly endangering their citizens' food security.

The actions of foreign investors in regards to land investment force us to weigh the importance of global food security and the livelihoods of thousands against the potential

for great profits in agribusiness. As one scholar argues, "Agriculture has become an industrial mode of corporate accumulation rather than the basis for productive livelihoods and a sustainable supply of good, healthy food. Local and national food systems have been mercilessly uprooted to make way for global corporate interests."⁷⁸

If the world does support the notion that food is a human right, individuals and governments must act accordingly to safeguard the interests of food insecure populations and not rely on businesses to benefit us all. If we allow agriculture to be controlled by a few large investors, we must also be willing to relinquish our moral obligations to each other as human beings.

Recommendations

To combat the current land grab, African governments need to make quick and decisive changes. Land tenure laws need to be reviewed and reformed and comprehensive documentation of land ownership needs to occur. Further, African governments need to keep food security for local populations at the top of the national agenda, even in the face of intriguing investment deals. Governments should reevaluate the practicality of biofuel standards, not only out of concern for populations in the developing world, but for the fact that they may not be a viable solution to climate change and the energy crisis.⁷⁹

Further Questions

⁷⁸ Giménez, Patel, Shattuck, 81.

⁷⁹ Cushion, Elizabeth, Adrian Whiteman, and Gerhard Dieterle. *Bioenergy Development: Issues and Impacts for Poverty and Natural Resource Management*. Publication. Washington, DC: World Bank, 2010; Giménez, Patel, Shattuck.

I am in the process of expanding this research by analyzing the complicit nature of African governments, asking the questions: Why are so many of these exploitative deals occurring with the stamp of approval from African national governments? What role does the colonial history and nature of the economies play? I would like to investigate to what extent does the global food crisis that has led to the land grab represent an overall failure of the capitalist system? I would like to expand this research to also analyze if the sustainability claims made by the foreign investors are purely cynical, or if they actually believe in the rhetoric they are using and are deceiving themselves?

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